

***Look Back. Look Around. Look Ahead.***

In the name of him who is coming in the clouds with great power and glory, dear friends in Christ: It's said that all good things must come to an end, but that's not exactly correct. Especially today as we have come to the last Sunday of the church year, we recognize and celebrate the real truth that for the faithful in Christ it's not good things that must end, but rather the bad things. That's what we long for: the Day of Christ's return when the dead will be raised in bodies immortal and incorruptible, and we will dwell together in the new creation in perfect righteousness and blessedness under the benevolent reign of Jesus Christ our Lord and King. Sin, death, sorrow, pain, loss—all the bad stuff that afflicts us now will be but distant memory. Everything about us and all that we experience in that age to come will only be good. That goodness will never end.

In view of this, our three Scripture readings urge us to keep watchful and to be ready at all times for that day when it comes. You don't want to be caught unaware, having dropped off into spiritual laziness and slumber. That would be disastrous. So, we need to stay busy and alert, as St. Jude says, continuing to build ourselves up in most holy faith.

And to help us as we wait with eager expectation for our Lord's coming and the righteousness he brings, the prophet Isaiah directs us to keep our eyes focused in three different directions. First, he says, we are to look back – back to the rock from which we were hewn, and the quarry from which we were taken. That's a rather kind way to say it considering that the Lord did not originally form mankind from noble stone like granite or marble, but rather from the lowly dust of the earth mixed with a bit of water to make clay. Ah, but from that humble beginning, the Lord raised up humankind to become the capstone and master of all that he created. He made the man and the woman in his own image. He prepared a garden paradise for our first parents as their home – a home through which the Lord provided for all of their needs. The plants, the animals, the totality of the creation were in full cooperation and submission, joyfully serving their human masters who in turn were in perfect union and harmony with the Lord. It's the way God designed things to be, the way they are supposed to be. We know that innately. Buried somewhere deep in our collective consciousness is the sense of what we lost in the fall into sin, the state of perfection that we know should exist but doesn't at present. Looking back to what we lost on account of our sin is to make us long all the more for the day when the Lord by his mighty power sets everything right again.

But we're not done looking back only to the paradise from which we fell. Isaiah calls us also to look back to our spiritual first parents: to Abraham and Sarah, whose children we are by faith. They were idol-worshipping pagans, lost in spiritual darkness, dead in sin, and completely childless – unable to perform even the most fundamental function of perpetuating human life when the Lord chose to put his special favor on them. He called them out of darkness, promised to bless them, to make them great, and to multiply them with descendants more numerable than the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky. He promised to give them a land of their own: a good land flowing with milk and honey – a picture of the eternal home that he promises to all the faithful. Most importantly, through them the Lord promised to bring his own Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, into the world.

We are to look back to Abraham and Sarah so that we recognize what they were when God called them, and how by his grace and mercy alone he not only made but *fulfilled* all of the

promises he made to them. He did bless them, make them great in this world, and multiply their descendents innumerable – not only their physical, biological descendants, the nation of Israel; but even more their spiritual descendants, people of all nations, who were born not of the perishable seed of flesh, but who are born from above by God's Word and the power of his Holy Spirit. What makes us Abraham and Sarah's spiritual offspring is that we share the faith of Abraham and Sarah, faith in the Lord's greatest promise, which is to save sinners from death and hell and to redeem them by the blood of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and give them eternal life.

By God's grace alone we too have this faith. We've seen so many of the promises fulfilled. And promises fulfilled in the past give us certain hope that the Lord's promises that apply to future will also be fulfilled. As Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." God's promises will outlast creation itself. They are more concrete and enduring than the physical order we call reality.

It's only logical then that Isaiah, after having directed us to look back, tells us next to look around. Look, he says, at the heavens above and the earth beneath. What do you see? Is all of creation and especially humankind happily humming along in good order, steadily progressing, becoming wiser, moving ever onward toward higher and more noble goals? Or do you see the opposite? Is the earth wearing out like a garment, its resources being exhausted, its air and water becoming more fouled? And people in general: are we really getting wiser and more moral? Or is what's passing for wisdom in our institutions of higher learning becoming ever more foolish, and is the love of many growing cold? With respect to the human moral condition, are things getting better or worse? Are we moving toward the light or the darkness? I think you'll have to agree that like what happens at this time of year, the days are getting shorter and the nights are getting longer and much colder.

Isaiah invites us to look around and see that this world of ours and the human condition within it are indeed getting worse, not better. All is in a state of steady decay – reminding us that it must one day come to its end, which in turn tells us not to set our hopes here. There's something better coming.

It's that something better that the Lord through Isaiah tells us is coming to look ahead toward. "My righteousness draws near, and my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the nations." In today's Gospel, Jesus said it this way: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the heavens." We know from other Scriptures that then, having set his faithful safely aside, the Lord will completely destroy this world. By God's Word it was called into existence, and by God's Word its elements will be consumed by fire and melt in the heat. Then, when every trace of this world that was cursed due to mankind's sin is gone, he will call into existence a new heaven and new earth, the home of everlasting righteousness made for those who will be from that time forth eternally righteous.

May our gracious God and Father, who has called us out of darkness to walk in the light of his Son, continue to build us up in most holy faith in our Savior Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. May he keep us looking back, looking around, and looking ahead that we may remain ever watchful and prepared for the glorious day of his return. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***